

FRANKFURTER ZEITSCHRIFT  
FÜR ISLAMISCH-THEOLOGISCHE STUDIEN

# FRANKFURTER ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR ISLAMISCH-THEOLOGISCHE STUDIEN

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## Comparative Theology

Ulrich Winkler | *guest editor*



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# Debating Muslim-Christian Comparative Theology

## An Introduction

*Ulrich Winkler\**

What is comparative theology (Winkler 2011: 231–64)?<sup>1</sup> This is a difficult and confusing topic in itself. And even more confusing is the notion of *Muslim* comparative theology – in particular if it is a Christian theologian who discusses it. In the last decade, the German government has launched a number of initiatives at establishing chairs for Islamic theology at public universities. On the one hand, this reflects a new appreciation for Islam in academia and the willingness to treat Muslims like Christians and their institutions and organizations like the latter as corporations subject to public law with equal religious rights and freedoms. On the other hand, questions arose as to whether such actions measure Islam according to criteria that are suitable for churches but impose alien discourses and forms on Islam. The debates continue, and the results are very diverse. Some expect the development of a European Islam, while others fear another so-called Western colonialization of Islam. Sceptics among the latter are occasionally denounced as Islamophobic, and supporters of the first are at times represented as betrayers of pure Islam. Given this complexity, the question becomes increasingly charged. Is theology about colonializing Islam? And this is even more the case when we ask about Islamic comparative theology.

A Muslim friend of mine explains comparative theology roughly as follows: It is like a Catholic priest inviting Muslims to a wedding while serving pork. This insinuates that comparative theology comes with the mutual incitement to betray one's own faith convictions. Can we then ask: Is comparative theology a double disassociation of Islam? What is the true heart of Islam and what is the accompanying misconception in this joke?

The one side is not untrue: Islam shaped a different kind of theology in comparison to Christianity, if we think of the development of doctrines

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the limits of this introduction, I will mention some of my previous articles for further reading within the text.

and systematic and dogmatic theology, at least in the sense of unified ecclesiastical institutions. The tasks of theology are shaped and developed by other forms of knowledge in a variety of disciplines, discourses and institutions. Theological knowledge is not encapsulated in a specific and demarcated discipline like Christian dogmatics. But the other side is true as well: Islam follows a prominent tradition of theological reasoning. The ability of all human beings to reason is the one foundational principle of Islam that honors people as God's devotees. No specific rituals initiate righteous human existence in God's eyes; rather, it is the creation of the human being as such with reason and dignity that enables one to be aware of God and to understand his revelation. Belief in God is not a voluntaristic matter, as anti-Muslim polemics asserts; Like the Anselmian quest in Christian theology of faith seeking understanding, Muslims, too, seek understanding in much the same way, the implications of their faith for life and the world. For them, too, reason represents the capacity of the human to believe and to act responsibly.

Comparative theology can be understood as an exchange of the ways in which faith seeks understanding, not in general but in particular cases. Muslims and Christians explore forms of dialogue and study where they discover points of common interest or challenging contemporary problems so that they can respond to them on the basis of their own traditions and spiritualities.

The *aims* of comparative theology seem to be manifold, but most of them can be subsumed under *learning from* the other tradition or *reciprocal illumination* (cf. Winkler 2016a: 191–203). This sounds fashionable and fits in with the spirit of the times, but it cannot be taken for granted if we remember the overwhelming evidence of the religion's history of hostility in the past that sometimes continues into the present. Theology bears responsibility because it developed a system of disparaging apologetics against the other. Therefore, not each and every theology that deals with other religions in particular as such can be classified as comparative theology in the sense we understand the term. Rather, comparative theology *requires a specific attitude of relating* to other religions – that is the subject of theological reasoning and what the discipline of *theology of religions* deals with (cf. Winkler 2013: 132–61). Comparative theology presupposes a theology of religions (cf. Winkler 2016b: 297–308) that offers good reasons for appreciation of other religions and of deconstructing absolute and exclusive truth claims of one's own belief system. Religious traditions have developed for centuries in complex relations of attraction and rejection, friendly and poi-